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SUBJECT: ISLAM IN AZERBAIJAN: A LOOK AT SHIA VILLAGES ON THE ABSHERON PENINSULA

REF: A. BAKU 00711
1B. BAKU 00451

BAKU 00001043 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador Anne Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: An August 17 trip to several conservative villages on the Absheron Peninsula revealed small, insular communities with conservative social and religious traditions, and a strong skepticism of the GOAJ-controlled Caucasus Muslim Board. The communities, religious practices -- like most Shia communities in Azerbaijan -- focused around shrines commemorating local saints. A local cleric, who studied for ten years in Qom, Iran, appeared to have a genuine religious following, in contrast to the majority of GOAJ-appointed prayer leaders who often are regarded as ill-educated. A seemingly well-connected Islamic political activist predicted that an Islamic political movement may emerge in the run-up to the 2008 Presidential election. Iran's influence in these villages appears to be selectively and indirectly important in a handful of these communities, primarily through Azerbaijani clerics who were educated in Iran. End Summary.

12. (SBU) During a trip to several Absheron Peninsula villages, Emboffs met with local Islamic figures and visited several mosques and holy places ("pirs"). These smaller towns on the Absheron Peninsula generally are regarded as some of the most conservative Shia communities in Azerbaijan. Emboffs visited Buzovna, Shuvalan, Mardakan, and Zabrat. (NOTE: Mashtaga and Nardaran are regarded as some of the most conservative Absheron villages. We will visit and report on these communities separately.) This cable is part of our "regional Islamic snapshots" series (ref A), which seeks to provide greater insight into the diversity of Islamic practice in Azerbaijan.

Local Community Matters

13. (C) A constant of Azerbaijani village life is that local connections and initiative move at a faster pace than the central government. In Buzovna, two local contacts (Haci Shunasi Mammadyarov and Molla Sadiq), who are respected religious leaders, proudly showed us several mosques and a mausoleum that were being refurbished or under construction. When asked about the funding for these improvements, both contacts stated that the local community provided all of the

money. Asked if the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) provided any funding, they responded with a note of disdain that the CMB "provides nothing." While shuttling us through these sites, we met an Azeri Iranian who is overseeing the remodeling project at one of the mosques. The Iranian, who was at ease in Azerbaijani, appeared pleased to meet an American diplomat and took pride in showing off his handiwork. The Iranian explained that while he lived in Tabriz, his uncle had moved from northern Iran to Buzovna in the 1940s. As this chance encounter demonstrates, familial and cross-border links play a role in every-day life in Azerbaijan.

¶4. (C) We also had lunch with a local akhund (prayer leader) and several local believers in Buzovna. The believers genuinely appeared to respect the cleric because of his education, which appeared to supersede the average akhund's education. (COMMENT: Our discussions with the Islamic community and analysts indicate that, in general, the Azerbaijani public has limited respect for the state-appointed akhunds because they are perceived to be poorly educated. Akhunds who were educated abroad or studied diligently while in Azerbaijan often are viewed with greater respect.) When asked about his background, the akhund said that he studied for ten years in Qom, Iran. (The akhund also noted that the GOAJ keeps careful watch on foreign-educated clerics, a point GOAJ officials also regularly make.) One of the participants even joked that the akhund had much more schooling than the head of the CMB, Sheikh Pashazade.

¶5. (SBU) After lunch, Emboffs attended Friday prayers at one of the Buzovna mosques. The prayers were led by the Qom-trained akhund. There were approximately 75 worshippers, a mix of Sunni and Shia. The majority of participants were able to say the prayers in Arabic.

Holy Sites are Popular

BAKU 00001043 002.2 OF 004

¶6. (U) Visiting pirs that commemorate a local saint is a key aspect of Islamic practice in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis often go to these sites to pray and tap into the powers associated with these local holy men. Many Azerbaijanis assign equal or greater importance to visiting shrines than the more established, institutional practice of praying in the mosque. Pirs are particularly important for Azerbaijan's Shia community and a good gauge for understanding popular Islamic attitudes.

¶7. (SBU) In Shuvalan village, we visited the Mir Movsum Aghanin Ziyaratgahi pir. This mausoleum is dedicated to a local holy man, Agha Mir Movsum, who was revered for his healing powers. The pir was a classic Efsahan or Bukhara design, with a blue-tiled exterior and ornately decorated interior. Inside the mausoleum, locals circle the grave of Agah Mir Movsum and make a personal wish. This is one of the busiest shrines in Azerbaijan, with a steady stream of locals coming with their families. Emboffs estimated that several dozen believers came every ten minutes on a Friday afternoon. While women are required to wear a headscarf inside the shrine, the majority of women relied on a local staff member to provide them with the proper attire. This snapshot of families coming together to make a wish at the grave of a local holy man is a phenomenon that can be found throughout Azerbaijan and may in fact reflect the most common religious practice here.

¶8. (SBU) Local Islamic scholar Aysel Vazirova told us this shrine's significance stems from at least two aspects. First, indigenous Azerbaijani Shiism places a deep respect on local saints, vice the more formal clerical hierarchy. This is particularly true in the regions of Azerbaijan. Second, Agah Mir Movsum's physical deformity appeals to the Shia emphasis on suffering. Vazirova explained that in the popular imagination, Movsum's physical suffering brought him

closer to Allah, thereby granting him healing powers.

¶19. (SBU) Emboffs also visited Ali Ayagi pir in Buzovna. This pir commemorates the footprint of Imam Ali. Only several locals came to the pir while we received a tour from a local staff member. The cigarette-smoking guide carefully explained the history of the shrine, suggesting that the most important aspect of the shrine was that Ali had spiritually visited the site.

Smashing Your Worries Away

¶10. (SBU) Our contacts in Buzovna took us to Tarsane, the crumbling walls of a church built by the Nobel brothers at the turn of the 20th Century. The grounds were littered with broken glass bottles. There were thousand glass shards, with several inches of glass covering the ground. The local contacts explained that this was a special religious site where locals came to get rid of "nervousness." The nervous Azerbaijani could come to this site, mutter a few words, and then have a bottle smashed against the wall. Upon hearing the crash, the nervousness, fear, or worry were supposed to jump out of the practitioner. Feeling confident in the good graces of our local contacts, Emboffs felt no need to put this ritual to the test. Asked if this was a uniquely Shia ritual, Molla Sadiq explained that this was a Caucasus tradition that all ethnic groups and religious confessions believed.

Shia Activist Wants Islam to Shape Politics

¶11. (C) We met with a local Islamic political activist, Haci Mehdi, in a small mosque in Zabrat village. Mehdi joked that Sheikh Pashazade and the CMB had limited control over this particular mosque. There was a poster of an Iranian or Iraqi Ayatollah in a classroom attached to the mosque. Mehdi presented Emboffs with prayer beads that Iraqi Ayatollah Sistani reportedly had sent to this community. Commenting on his personal background, Mehdi explained that he was the former chief of the Azerbaijani Islamic Party in the late 1990s. Mehdi observed that since its inception in the early 1990s, the GOAJ and the Iranian government each sought to control this party. Over time, both governmental actors were

BAKU 00001043 003.2 OF 004

partly successful in this endeavor, according to Mehdi. He stated that he left the party in 1999 because he thought the party was internally divided and losing steam. When asked about recent local press reports that the Islamic Party had elected a new chairman (Movsum Samadov), Mehdi said that Samadov was a weak leader and probably coopted by the GOAJ.

¶12. (C) Mehdi also noted that he participated in the founding congress of the Islamic Renaissance Party in Astrakhan, Russia in 1990. He claimed that as a youth, he was inspired by his family's staunch opposition to the communist party's atheism. As the USSR was dissolving, he networked with a number of Islamic activists who created Islamic parties and movements in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Chechnya. (COMMENT: While we cannot confirm the precise role Mehdi may have played in helping to create these Islamic movements, there was a network of Islamic activists that created national Islamic parties as the Soviet Union was falling apart. Many of these individuals came from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and some majority-Muslim areas of Russia. Springing from the 1990 Astrakhan conference of the Islamic Renaissance Party, several national branches of the party were created.)

¶13. (C) Turning to the current political situation in Azerbaijan, Mehdi predicted that an Islamic movement with political ambitions would emerge in the next few months. Mehdi suggested he was part of a broad, informal network of people who looked to the 2008 Presidential election as an

opportunity to enhance the role of Islam in the Azerbaijani political system. Mehdi criticized the Iranian political system and referred to himself as an Azerbaijani patriot, while arguing that the Islamic value of justice needed to have more of a shaping role in the current Azerbaijani political system. (COMMENT: While we are still assessing the veracity of Mehdi's claim that an Islamic political movement would emerge in the near future, a variety of political actors and commentators have made this claim over the years. Based on his prior position in the Azerbaijani Islamic party and apparent connection to Shia activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu -- who called Mehdi during our meeting -- we believe Mehdi is plugged into a network of Azerbaijani Islamic activists. Septel will offer our assessment of the role of Islam in the 2008 Presidential election.)

¶14. (C) Mehdi also predicted, based on his unspecified sources, that the GOAJ would launch a "provocation" in Nardaran, most likely during the winter. Mehdi said that the GOAJ seeks to show Western countries that it has a "fundamentalist problem" in advance of the 2008 Presidential election. Mehdi argued that recent press reports on tensions between Nardaran locals and rich Bakuvian dacha owners was part of a GOAJ effort to raise tensions. While there are genuine tensions between local Nardaran residents and rich outsiders, Mehdi stated that the GOAJ seeks to escalate these tensions, a claim which we will also examine. (COMMENT: Nardaran and surrounding villages are undergoing a transformation, as rich Baku residents are building lavish summer homes in the midst of traditionally closed and conservative communities. The press has focused on this story in recent months.)

Comment

¶15. (C) As these and ref A snapshots demonstrate, Islamic practice and observance in Azerbaijan is far from monolithic. These Absheron villages are small, self-contained communities with a long tradition of conservative social and religious practices. Even several dozen miles from the capital, one can sense that the CMB has little religious authority among locals, as we heard in several of the locals' derogatory comments about the CMB or the Sheikh.

¶16. (C) Commentators have speculated on the degree to which Iran may influence these small Shia communities. As our chance encounters with an Iranian citizen and an Iranian-educated akhund demonstrate, Iran has a presence in these communities. Based on our impressions -- as well as the careful watch that the GOAJ keeps on Nardaran and surrounding villages -- Iran's influence in these communities seems to be primarily of an indirect nature: Azerbaijani clerics who have studied in Qom, Meshhad, or

BAKU 00001043 004.2 OF 004

other Shia learning centers and Iranian cultural centers (ref B), vice direct influence by Iranian clerics or Iranian security agents having a free hand to stir religious passions. On balance, we believe Iran's indirect influence may be selectively important in a handful of local communities or mosques. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Iran's influence is greatest in the network of Azerbaijan's underground mosques, a religious community we have not yet been able to meet.

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